The Harris Survey

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55% Pin High Hopes On Reagan Presidency

By Louis Harris

On the eve of Ronald Reagan's inaugural, the American people clearly have built up high hopes for their new president. By 55 percent to 37 percent, a majority feels that Reagan will turn out to be a better president than most of the eight occupants of the White House before him.

In the latest Harris Survey a nationwide cross-section of 1,499 adults was asked to assess the last eight presidents on nine key dimensions. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt ranked at the top on most of the elements tested:

• On which president was best on domestic affairs, Roosevelt came out first, with 24 percent, followed by Kennedy at 23 percent.

• On which president was best on foreign affairs, Richard Nixon finished on top as the choice of 30 percent, followed by Kennedy at 20 percent, then Roosevelt and Truman at 11 percent, and Dwight Eisenhower at 10 percent.

• On which president was best able to get things done, Roosevelt came out on top with 27 percent, followed by Kennedy at 25 percent, and Truman at 14 percent.

• On which president could be trusted most in a crisis, Kennedy was first, singled out by 30 percent, followed by Truman with 18 percent, and then Roosevelt and Eisenhower tied at 15 percent.

• On which president most inspired confidence, Kennedy finished ahead of the other seven with 38 percent, followed by Roosevelt at 24 percent, Eisenhower at 13 percent, and Truman at 9 percent.

• On which president set the highest moral standards, Kennedy once again emerged on top, singled out by 23 percent, followed by Eisenhower at 17 percent, Truman at 16 percent, Jimmy Carter at 13 percent, Roosevelt at 11 percent, and Gerald Ford at 8 percent.

• On which president was the most appealing personally, Kennedy finished far ahead, cited by 63 percent. He was followed by Roosevelt at 11 percent and Eisenhower at 8 percent.

The Harris Survey also asked Americans to assess the past eight presidents on two negative dimensions:

• On which president set the lowest moral standards, Nixon was singled out by 60 percent, followed by Johnson and Carter at 7 percent each and Kennedy at 5 percent.

• On which president was least able to get things done, Carter walked off with that dubious honor, singled out by 44 percent, followed by Ford at 13 percent, Nixon at 12 percent, and Johnson at 9 percent.

These latest survey results show that Kennedy, the one assassinated president of the eight, still is widely respected and has a special place among modern chief executives. Roosevelt also ranks particularly well, despite the fact that two full generations have passed since he was in office.

But Carter does not fare very well. Only 2 percent rate him as best on domestic affairs, 5 percent on foreign policy, 2 percent on most inspiring confidence, 4 percent as the most appealing personally, 13 percent as having set the highest moral standards. Also, 7 percent cite Carter as having set the lowest moral standards, and 44 percent as having been the president least able to get things done.

When asked how Reagan compares with these past eight presidents, 11 percent think he will be one of the best presidents, 44 percent say he'll be better than most, 28 percent don't think he'll be as good as most, and 9 percent expect he'll be worse than the presidents before him. On balance, a 55-to-37-percent majority expects Reagan to do well in office.

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